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SUBJECT: MOFAT PROTESTS GENERAL BELL'S PUBLIC REMARKS

Classified By: A/DCM JOSEPH Y. YUN. REASONS 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a January 18 meeting with the acting DCM, MOFAT Director General for North American Affairs Cho Byong-jae expressed a strong protest about two aspects of the public remarks General Bell had delivered at the Seoul Foreign Correspondent's Club earlier in the day. The first problem, Cho said, was that Bell's critical remarks about the need for changes in armistice management had given the impression that there was a disagreement between the USG and ROKG on this issue, where there was not such disagreement. Second, and more serious, was Bell's "explosive" mention of the fact that some of the funds paid by the ROKG under SMA would be used to fund the transfer of the Second Infantry Division (2ID), an aspect of the funding agreement that had not yet been explained to the National Assembly or the public. Cho asked that his protest, which he said represented the views of Foreign Minister Song Min-soon, be relayed to Washington. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) On January 18, Acting DCM Joseph Yun was called into the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) to meet with Cho Byong-jae, Director General of the Bureau of North American Affairs. In the meeting, Cho strongly objected to General Bell's remarks about armistice management and OPCON transfer because the tone of the remarks gave the impression that the USG and ROKG disagreed on these issues, and because, since these were issues that "we governments are going to talk about," it was premature to comment to the press at this time. The ROKG and USG were in agreement on OPCON transfer, the issue that remained to be settled was only the timing, Cho said, adding that the ROKG press was likely to interpret Bell's remarks otherwise.

¶3. (C) DG Cho went on to say he was more troubled by the remarks relating to SMA. Most "explosive" was General Bell's comments, during the Q&A session, that revealed that some of the ROKG funding under SMA would be used to fund the relocation of the Second Infantry Division (2ID). This "funneling of SMA funds to LPP (Land Partnership Plan) projects" was a feature of the SMA arrangement but it had not yet been explained to the National Assembly or the public. Bell's mention of it could make the National Assembly approval process for SMA in February more difficult. (NOTE: When the ROKG explained the Yongsan Relocation Plan (YRP) and LPP agreements to the National Assembly and the Korean public in 2004, it stated that the "requester would pay" -- since

the ROKG had requested that USFK move out of Yongsan, the ROK would pay for YRP, and since the USG had requested to move 2ID to the south, the USG would pay for LPP. The ROK Government has always understood that to be an oversimplification of the actual agreements, but it is what they have led their public to believe. MOFAT officials claim they intended to brief the National Assembly on the use of SMA funds as a part of LPP, but would have preferred to do so before it came out in the press. END NOTE).

14. (C) Cho also objected to the implication in Bell's remarks that Korean employment could decline (because the amount of burdensharing support the ROK will provide under the 2007-2008 SMA Agreement falls short of USFK needs). He said the ROKG had agreed to increase its SMA contribution on condition that the level of employment be maintained. Bell's talk of "possible cuts" was therefore a problem.

15. (C) Summing up, Cho said that MOFAT wanted to express a strong protest at the remarks, which had gone public on sensitive issues and created the impression of differences between our two governments where none existed. He said that MOFAT would like to be sure that this kind of thing will not happen again. He asked that these views be conveyed to both State and Defense.

16. (C) Pol M/C replied that we would convey MOFAT's comments and would reply to DG Cho with any response. In addition, Pol M/C pointed out that a key issue General Bell wanted to raise was the authority-to-responsibility mismatch that will arise when the Combined Forces Command is inactivated; this issue needed to be addressed in order to find a means to credibly maintain the Armistice. POL M/C said that given the importance of the issue, the Korean public had a need to be informed. On several occasions, General Bell had stated that the process of finding a resolution would be done in close consultations with the ROKG, as well as with the other UNC sending states.

17. (C) Pol M/C also said that it was his personal opinion that some of the remarks were partly a reflection of USFK frustrations at what they could plausibly see as lack of cooperation on the part of the ROKG. An example was the recent leak of information indicating that the Yongsan to Pyongtaek move would be delayed by several years, which indicated a lack of regard for quality-of-life issues for U.S. forces stationed in Korea. Other recent examples included USFK's difficulties on returning camps to the ROK, inability to adequately train fighter pilots, and the gaping hole created in the budget by the recent SMA. Regarding the delay in the move to Pyongtaek, Cho commented that his recent consultations with a range of engineers involved in the base move project gave him the strong sense that it was never plausible to complete the massive project, which he equated to building Incheon Airport, in a few years.

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